

### III

#### THE LITERARY HISTORIAN

**I**N a pleasant cottage built by the Wilsons, the only house they ever built or owned, architected with the upper storey cross-beamed in the English fashion, situated in peaceful Library Place in Princeton, the last house on your left as you approached it; beyond it the broad acres owned by a descendant of an old New Jersey family and planted in grain; the cottage set about with a privet hedge, in a covert of pines, aspens, and an ancient enormous copper beech; within a westerly room was Mr. Wilson's library-study lined with books, some four or five thousand, most of them carefully selected by the master of the house; here sat the future President of the United States.

He, lover of the poetry of Wordsworth, loved especially the lines on Dove Cottage. His verbal memory was not good, and so it must have been from a pocket edition of Wordsworth that he read aloud (for the manyeth time) the lines as we stood together in that tiny cottage near Grasmere, much smaller than his own cottage in Princeton, but about it the same suggestion of peace and seclusion (both of which he dearly loved) :

O happy Garden! whose seclusion deep  
Hath been so friendly to industrious hours;  
And to soft slumbers, that did gently steep  
Our spirits, carrying with them dreams of flowers.

Wilson's own sleep was soft, his hours industrious, and as he read in the poet's home the lines I fancied some mental association with his own embowered cottage across the sea.

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There were incongruities in that sheltered study, for the Wilsons had not the money to purchase antiques: a revolving bookcase, metal filing drawers, and a roll-top desk of oak. Businesslike in nineteenth century style, for the luxuries of a modern business office had not appeared in the America of that day. The drawers of the desk were labelled in his own script, neat and uniform as copper-plate. An air of business in this sweet sheltered room. At the ugly desk sat the master busily writing in longhand, shorthand (which with customary diligence he had learned many years before), on a typewriter, a Caligraph, which he kept with him even when he was chief occupant of the White House.

Many neat notes for lectures, public addresses, many essays, several books, were manufactured at this desk.

If Wilson's spirit could return and speak in mortal tones, it is possible that he would pronounce these the happiest years of his life on earth. He had "come to himself," to use part of the title of one of his most circulated essays. He was adored by the Princeton constituency, known far and wide as one who could lecture with penetrating insight, spicing his discourses with inherited humor, one who could speak entertainingly and with shrewd wisdom at public dinners, could write engagingly on a variety of topics.

Absorbingly interested in politics, national and international, he was free from the restlessness and anxiety of office-seekers. His was now the business of interpreting politics, past and present. Princeton had learned his worth, established for him an especially endowed chair, set financial anxiety at a comfortable distance. He was a man of letters, enamored of words, learning, ideas. He knew himself for a literary artist, though, like all artists, aware that his accomplishment fell short of his conception. I recall his pious resolution to re-read his Shakespeare, and, if possible, he said

modestly, capture a little of the magic of words in that poet's writing.

He had his moods; all people have them, especially artistic people, and at intervals he looked out upon a world of activity, vaguely craved a chance to spring into the dust and clatter of the political arena, and introduce into the confusions and futilities some of his political ideals, for there was not much order or idealism in American politics in the 1890's—prior to the Spanish-American war. But I am persuaded that these were moods, not designs. Not until about 1909 did he begin to give some serious thought to a political career. That he was then meditating a plunge into politics is evident from the testimony of his most constant correspondent.

In the dozen years of his Princeton professorship he was a happy man of letters, studying literary method almost as assiduously as he studied substance. Aside from larger considerations, it was perhaps well that he was diverted from writing, for, like Walter Pater, he was becoming too much the stylist, too much entranced with words and the flavor of antiquity.

It is difficult to draw a consistent portrait of a complex man, and Wilson was one of the most complex of men, and hence some of his statements appear contradictory. For instance, he once said that getting into a fresh piece of writing was like making entrance into a house with many false doors. One gropes and fumbles, opens door after door only to find himself against a blank wall. At last he finds the right door and all is clear, corridors, chambers, closet nooks, everything. Which seemed to mean that he found writing laborious. In fact, he once quoted Fox's statement that easy writing makes extremely hard reading, adding that he hoped the reverse was not true, that laborious writing makes laborious

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reading. Yet on another occasion he said that he had become so much the professional writer that, like a trained mill horse, he could take up each day's work complacently where he had left it the preceding day.

Wilson published many essays, most of them semi-political, a few purely literary or moralistic. I wish there were time to linger over them, many of them collected in two volumes, *An Old Master and Other Political Essays*, the old master being Adam Smith; and *Mere Literature and Other Essays*, the latter volume containing two of his most gallant essays: one on Walter Bagehot, "the man who first clearly distinguished the facts of the English constitution from its theory," and the other on Edmund Burke, who discerned "the practical spirit of our race in affairs of government."

It was Bagehot whose classic book on the English constitution stood for model of Wilson's *Congressional Government*. It was Burke who was Wilson's guide in dealing with practical politics, until the Great War tore the world asunder, and Wilson, in conversation, once remarked that in the world's chaos following the outbreak of war in Europe there seemed to be no shore lights in the port to mark the channels for political sailing. Wilson is reported to have said that he had written only two books which deserved to live, *Congressional Government* and *Mere Literature*, a judgment with which I am going to take issue presently.

Aside from some public lectures delivered at Columbia University on the American constitution, collected in a volume intended to supersede *Congressional Government*, but far inferior to that early masterpiece, Wilson wrote three histories and a book which blends history and political science, *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics*, a textbook which has kept many college students awake o' nights with uttered groanings. His old father

asked: "Woodrow, couldn't you have put more juice into that book?" It gave accounts of the origins and natures of government in various European countries, and was rendered obsolete by President Wilson himself as leader in the alteration of the map of Europe.

For preparation of this book Mrs. Wilson underwent toilsome drudgery by reading and digesting for him many German monographs—she perfected her reading knowledge of German for this purpose. Wilson could and did read German in those early years, but slowly. In fact, he was a slow reader of books even in English, once exclaimed when another, not an especially rapid reader, had completed the reading of a book while he himself was hardly midway in it: "Am I the slowest reader in the world?" But he was thorough, and *The State* was for many years an authoritative handbook.

He and I read together proof of this book, he holding the manuscript, I the galleys. He read aloud words and punctuation, and whimsically adopted the manner at table: "Pass me the butter comma please period" and so forth.

Wilson was gratified, his wife delighted, when Professor Albert Bushnell Hart of Harvard invited him to write the third volume in the *Epochs of American History*. Wilson acquitted himself handsomely in his book, *Division and Reunion: 1829-1889*, a compact duodecimo of three hundred and seventeen pages.

This volume completely negatives his alleged assertion that he wrote only two books that deserved to live. It not only deserves to live, it has lived. In a brief "editor's introduction", dated Cambridge, November 14, 1925, after the author's death, it is stated that "It has been printed more than thirty-five times." It was again reprinted in 1929 and in 1932. Whether there have been reprints since 1932 I do

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not know, but it is clear that the little volume has come to stay. Other histories cover the period, but none outmodes this.

It is factual and interpretative. It is amazing how much is compressed in so small a compass, how many details of the momentous period, how, for instance, the history of the war between the states is compacted in thirty-six pages, lucid accounts of all major military operations, thumbnail sketches of the leaders, done with equal justice and vividness, details about political and strategic objectives, economic conditions, financial policies, foreign complications, dramatic episodes and more else than can be catalogued. Such condensation and vivification were possible only because no words are wasted.

Of stylistic mannerisms which were to mark and mar his later historical books there is nothing except an overuse of the word "processes." I think in no book he published is there an equivalent impression of perfect mastery of entangled material, of no haste and no waste. It is an informative book in quiet reading of it, an enchanting book for careful study, as I have been re-studying it for the paragraphs about it in this chapter. It moves as by an internal motion.

When Wilson wrote the book, in 1892, he had not been west of Buffalo, I think, but through much study and meditation, he had grasped the significance of the "westernization." Professor William E. Dodd, eminent American historian, now United States Ambassador to Germany, in his biography of Wilson, emphasizes the mutual reactions on each other of two Johns Hopkins students, Frederick J. Turner, who became a pathfinder in the tangled history of the West, and Woodrow Wilson. Wilson inspired Turner with "new enthusiasm." Turner inspired Wilson to closer study of the western influence upon American development. Both men

rejected the then accepted theory of the expansion of New England in the making of the country.

Wilson sees clearly that a new breed of men had been made by the migration to the West: by the Louisiana Purchase, the struggles in Texas and Oregon, the emergence of Andrew Jackson, whom Wilson understands as if he had known him, condemning Jackson's autocratic defiance of the decisions of the Supreme Court, but admiring the rugged character whose administration created a new epoch in American history; admired Lincoln next perhaps to Washington and Lee. Wilson's southern rearing, northern training, has served him well. He once remarked in conversation that American history can never be understood by one who knows only the South or only the North. He knew both, and by sheer intuition he knew the rough-hewn West with its boundless vigor, crude chivalry. He has sympathetic understanding of the slave-holding South, the "peculiar institution" which "it is now possible to discuss without passion." "Without passion" he discusses the tenacity of the South bent upon extending slavery into the new territories, the tenacity of the Abolitionists bent upon ending slavery, the Wilmot proviso, the Kansas-Nebraska bill, the pure legality of the Southern contentions undoubtedly closer to the original intent of the Fathers than Lincoln's patient recognition that an industrialized North and West had made parts of the constitution purely "literary." "The legal theory . . . would hardly have been questioned in the early years of the government." "But constitutions are not mere legal documents: they are the skeleton frame of a living organism; and in this case the course of events had nationalized the government once deemed confederate." That was a doctrine which I used to hear him expound when I was a student under him at Wesleyan University. One day Wilson concluded with words

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to this effect: "Gentlemen, men have been expelled from their lecture chairs for saying no more than I have said today." Possibly on this day, possibly on another I walked away from the lecture hall with a student who was really thinking, thinking how Wilson would have acted if he had been old enough to fight, concluding his dialectic with the confident statement "he would have fought with the South." And indeed I do not know what the decision would have been. As a bit of literary casuistry it presents a dilemma like that in Frank R. Stockton's *Lady and the Tiger*, in O. Henry's *Thimble, Thimble*. In grim fact it would have been the stern problem which General Lee solved one way and General Thomas the opposite way. The doctrine is held in practice now by many a lawyer who appeals to the written constitution but who eagerly accepts such spread of nationalism as Wilson never defended even in the intense excitement of war preparation when he was head of the federal government.

It would be a pleasant task to write a chapter on this remarkable book, but there are other things to say herein.

One point in addition: Wilson, who permits himself little eloquence in this volume, says, writing of the Northern contention: "A nation awoke into consciousness, shook its locks, and established its power." This is the underlying philosophy of the book, not argued out in dialectic, but running like a thread through the whole, a binding cord for the almost innumerable reported facts, facts recorded with accuracy possible only for one who has studied the period exhaustively.

Professor Dodd rates high this book, not only as a reliable record of multifarious occurrences, but chiefly, perhaps, because, first published in 1893, it "set up a school of historical thought which has long since become orthodox. His idea that the nation was not born till the close of the Civil War he made the basis of his treatment of the period of 1827 to



1889, and he made the case so clear that few cavil at him today."

On the basis of this book Dodd sees in Wilson a potential historian of first magnitude, and appears a little rueful that Wilson was diverted to political science, though realizing that destiny was preparing the political scientist to be an outstanding president of the United States and a world adjudicator.

However, neither Professor Dodd nor Mr. Ray Stannard Baker, favorable biographers, nor on the other hand lukewarm or hostile commentators have much praise for Wilson's two longest histories, *George Washington* and *A History of the American People*, both prepared as serials for *Harper's Magazine* at the request of Mr. Alden, the editor, both subsequently issued as books: *George Washington* in one volume, *American People* in five volumes, both profusely illustrated, among the artists Howard Pyle, eminently equipped by draughtsmanship and saturation in Colonial and Revolutionary history.

Mr. H. G. Wells, in his *Experiment in Autobiography*, says that Mr. Wilson was "narrowly limited to an old-fashioned American conception of history." That may be true; certainly he did not study history biologically as did Mr. Wells, or with the Roman Catholic slant of Mr. Hilaire Belloc, or in the scientific manner of Mr. James Harvey Robinson. But is there no place in our libraries for the writings of John Richard Green, John Fiske, Woodrow Wilson—none of whom was scientific, or dogmatic, all of whom sought to rehumanize people who had lived so humanly on this globe?

As I am not an historian, it is presumptuous for me to differ from Dr. Dodd, but it seems to me that neither he nor the others have the right stance toward these books.

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In the circumstances of the writing and publication of them they had to be "popular" rather than erudite, for they were created for readers of a popular magazine, not for the discussions of specialists.

In 1897 Wilson published an essay *On Being Human*. He opened with a quotation from his beloved Bagehot: "The rarest sort of a book [is] a book to read: [and] the knack of style is to write like a human being." Three pages further on Wilson writes: "When you say that a book was meant to be read, you mean, for one thing, of course, that it was not meant to be studied."

When Wilson wrote *The State* he wrote a book to be studied. When he wrote *Division and Reunion* he wrote a book of information laced with historical philosophy. But when he wrote *George Washington* he wrote a book to be read and enjoyed. A harsh critic calls it romantic biography. It is romantic only in the sense in which Bliss Perry in his admirable book on *The American Mind* asserts and proves that romance is deep imbedded in the American character, from boys "playing Indian" to cowboys and, as he says whimsically, real estate agents. It is romantic only in the sense that an unspoiled American prefers the picturesque to the sophisticated. It is romantic only in the sense that what is natural in the American mind loves the heroic in heroic men. Poor disillusioned Thomas Carlyle thought that romance had died with Frederick of Prussia. But Carlyle had not been in America; yet he saw something beautiful or heroic in a few Americans whom he met intimately or casually, like Emerson or Daniel Webster. Americans are incorrigible hero devotees. There was that in Wilson which quivered into rhetoric when he read about and meditated on George Washington.

The book is in no way fictionized biography in the manner

of brilliant Lytton Strachey, himself excusable because of his dazzling genius, but unhappily responsible for a horde of would-be disciples, without his gifts, only with his romantic embellishments and distortions. Wilson's *George Washington* is not of that ilk. It is factual, illuminated with imagination, departs not from accredited records. Perhaps that is one just ground of criticism, that it adds nothing to our knowledge of the facts about Washington. But the hero rides through the volume, stately yet alive.

It is not a documental book, has neither footnotes nor bibliography. No searching of the archives was needed. Merely a careful reading, or re-reading of things familiar, such as Robert Beverley's *History and Present State of Virginia*, the writings of William Stith, Hugh Jones, James Blair; the salty wit of William Byrd of Westover, who "never took the pains to publish anything," but whose writings were printed later and were frequently quoted from with gusto by Wilson; Washington's own voluminous writings, cited *in extenso* by Wilson; the writings of John Adams and other Revolutionary notables. One may trace through the text much of Wilson's preparatory reading.

There are some surprising omissions. In a brief account of the battle of Charlestown he refers to "the hills of Charlestown," but does not name the most famous of them. The index refers to "the Battle of Bunker Hill." But, whatever the precisionist may call the engagement, the "general reader" to whom the book is chiefly addressed has his eyes peeled for the name of the fateful hill in the text. Thomas Paine is not called by name. Later, in a superb address at Trenton Wilson quoted Paine's most familiar phrase, "times that try men's souls" and there are brief allusions to him in the *History of the American People*, but no reference in *George Washington* to the man with "genius in his eyes,"

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whose pen, so said contemporaries, next to Washington's sword did most to win the Revolutionary War. In the *History* there are ample accounts of Benjamin Franklin, but in the *Washington* only two casual references to him, though there are analytical and just estimates of Samuel and John Adams. Arriving at the Battle of Saratoga the author says of Howe he "did not ascend the river" to join Burgoyne, omitting the piquant and somewhat tragical circumstance that George Germaine back in England dispatched to Burgoyne orders for the conjunction of troops, but neglected to sign or send the complementary letter to Howe, whether or not it is apocryphal that Germaine neglected this crucial detail because of his haste to be off on a fox-hunt. In the same account of Saratoga the author says merely that "Arnold once more made his name in battle," with no allusion to that wild horseback ride and tocsin summons to troops which probably won the victory and accentuates the perfidy of Benedict Arnold's subsequent treason. Similar omissions could be multiplied, but are minor considerations compared with the thing that Wilson does, the re-creation of Washington himself, which, with all respect for Dr. Dodd, is not "eulogy," not "one more addition to the steel engraving statues of the Father of his Country." Washington emerges from the pages an understandable human being, unblemished by gossip, à la Rupert Hughes, it is true, but human. William Bayard Hale in his venomous book *The Story of a Style* sneers at Wilson for writing that Washington "rode in his noble way" through the streets of New York. Well, didn't Washington ride "nobly"? What is the objection to stating a fact?

Hostiles, writing after the World War, conjured the notion of self-portraiture in the *Washington*, self-punctilious, aloof, resentful of familiarities, insistent upon deference. They could not have said this honestly if they had known the

modest gentleman of Library Place, Princeton, whose sense of humor would have erupted at the suggestion that he himself would some day be in Washington's chair, head of the nation, leader in efforts to reorder a war-distracted world. Such deductions are *post hoc*.

Wilson revered Washington, whether or not "too much," as Dr. Dodd says, is matter of opinion. Loving external England, loving Virginia, charmed by the similarity between the two, loving the stately manners of an antique world, Wilson himself, when he was writing this book, was the simplest of men in dress, demeanor, habit of life, and something of a romanticist, though no romancer. Romanticism is in part a love of things remote, and young Professor Wilson was sufficiently remote from Washington's days and Washington's ways.

He himself was a good horseman though no hunter, and he rejoiced in fancy over the authentic facts of those hard-riding, fox-hunting eighteenth-century Virginia gentlemen. He himself seldom drank anything, but he relished the records of those stout-hearted, strong-bellied Virginians of a century and more earlier returning from an all-day hunt for prolonged sessions over the punch bowl, out-of-door men who could carry their liquor, and, when they couldn't, would be put to bed by faithful negro servants, sleep like the just, and awake next morning clear-eyed and ready for another day in the field, another evening in the great hall.

Wilson, like most Americans with the "American mind," loved a hero, and his pulse beat faster as he read and wrote of young Washington on Braddock's ill-starred campaign, of the much older Washington at Trenton and Yorktown.

Wilson does not fail to catch the homelier side of Washington's career, the sagacious planter, unerring judge of horse-flesh, practical surveyor.

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With his own political instincts he understood Washington, the reluctant statesman, accepting the presidency only because duty called that way, by sheer intelligence and devotion to the new country becoming an exceedingly able head of affairs; conscientious and conscious of the perils of the new country; walking circumspectly, aware that his acts would become precedents, as did his flat refusal to accept a third term in the presidency.

Wilson makes quietly realizable Washington's return to Mt. Vernon, his wife and step-grandchildren; his adaptation to the much-changed Virginia, in many ways different from the pre-war Virginia.

With an artist's restraint Wilson calmly records the physical exposure and death of Washington—less than half a page. Dr. Joseph Wilson's comment was: "Woodrow, I am glad you let George do his own dying."

The great fault of the book is an over-styled manner of writing. Comment on that may be reserved for paragraphs on *A History of the American People*. Sufficient now to say that the fine forthrightness of the literary style of *Congressional Government* and *Division and Reunion* has gone, and Wilson is on his way to the troublesome literary mannerisms of his *History of the American People*. He has been reading books too much for their stylistic qualities. He is progressing to the pit which every self-conscious "stylist," like Henry James, say, digs for himself. He was to come out of all that and write his greatest literature when he wasn't thinking of "literature" at all, was thinking only of his responsibilities to the Nation of which he had become chief executive, of his responsibilities to a world in the mad chaos of universal murder.

But to return to the matter of the book. Wilson's patriotism increases with the narrative: the just causes of disaffec-

tion; the confusions and blunderings of the English ministers, Grenville, Rockingham, North.

Precisely because Wilson had for nearly twenty years been getting more intimately acquainted with the long struggle of Englishmen for self-government, he could the better understand the colonists' contentions; who, whether deliberate men like Washington, or flaming torches like Samuel Adams and Patrick Henry, insisted upon the inalienable rights of Englishmen since Magna Carta. He is almost profuse in praise of the pro-American stand and arguments of Chatham and his own Edmund Burke. There are sharp passages in criticism of the futilities and stupidities of the British government. But the book is not vitriolic, as too much American history has been.

*George Washington* is a book by an informed and thoughtful American; too well-informed to be a twister of the Lion's Tail, too loyal to the new nation to leave any misapprehensions about the essential justice of the colonists' demands. It is a book to make more patriotic and intelligent Americans, to rouse fresh admiration without adulation for the grave gallant central figure in the struggle.

In his essay, *The Truth of the Matter*, Wilson stresses imagination as well as knowledge of the facts as prerequisites for the writing of reliable history. Excellently blended are the two when he undertakes the "difficult art of telling the truth."

If a book brings to life a superlative man of the past, a foregone gracious mode of life, a relentless struggle against odds, is it not worth the writing—and the reading? Such is Wilson's *George Washington*.

I must be briefer in haphazard comment on the longer book, *A History of the American People*. The model was Green's *Short History of the English People*, which Wilson

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had been reading since he was a college boy. Frankly, Wilson's book does not measure up to the model. Green's book is a masterpiece, Wilson's is not quite that.

For one thing, Wilson was, by design, writing a more "popular" book than Green's; again, as the *Washington*, a series of magazine articles to be read, not studied.

For another thing, the ambush of "style" has entrapped him, more than in the *Washington*, the fate of the literary "stylist," whose flaws grow by what they feed on.

As in the *Washington*, he apparently has not searched the manuscript archives, but has read carefully early and later printed Americana, from John Smith, Bradford, Winthrop, Hakluyt, Parkman, down through *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Olmstead's *Texas Journey*, John S. Wise's *End of an Era*, Alexander H. Stephens' *Constitutional View of the War between the States*, Grant's *Memoirs*, the *Congressional Record*, innumerable "lives" of leaders of the Civil War, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, newspapers and magazines, and much else that cannot be listed here, for, unlike the *Washington*, this work has long bibliographies at the conclusion of each chapter. The range of reading and reference is immense.

Saturation in elder books seems to have intensified Wilson's instinct for quaint expressions. There are mannerisms which would have been affectations in a less unaffected writer. One grows a bit weary of "'tis" and "'twas," of the prefix "Mister" attached to every masculine name, even "Mr. Pym" and "Mr. Bacon," meaning Nathaniel of Bacon's Rebellion. Words not archaic are coddled and repeated to weariness, "great," "gallant," "process," and so forth. One of Mr. Wilson's loyal friends said that he wished Mr. Wilson would bottle up "process" and not reopen the bottle.

I have been reading a particularly vicious book on the Wil-



sonian mannerisms, W. B. Hale's *The Story of a Style*, and it is surprising to find what a catalogue of repeated words the author, an able man who should have been better employed, has massed, what a superabundance of adjectives, of vague locutions, of overmannered introductory sentences, in short of stylistic flaws, due not to carelessness but to fascination for stylisms.

Francis Bacon wrote: "The first distemper of learning is when men study words and not matter." Wilson would never have ceased to study matter, but as I read *American People* I am reminded of what Bacon said in furtherance: "Words are but the images of matter . . . to fall in love with them is all one as to fall in love with a picture." The younger Wilson, like Shakespeare in his nonage, was amorous of words and phrases. But Wilson was quite unaware of his own trend, was mildly surprised when a reviewer called his style "self-conscious," though he with whom Wilson talked of this thought silently that one who did not know the man, his personal unaffectedness, might well get from the printed page an impression of self-consciousness.

This study of words may have been fitting Wilson for the simpler grandeur of his greatest state papers. About eighteen years after Shakespeare wrote the "sugared" phrases of *Love's Labor's Lost* he wrote *Coriolanus*, a neglected play but one of the noblest things he ever did in its restrained phrasing. Sixteen years after Wilson wrote the *History of the American People* he wrote the special message to Congress advising a declaration of a state of war between this country and Germany, which, regarded merely as English composition, has no parallel in presidential addresses, except Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg. Both men had learned much in the long intervals. After all, it is something to phrase a people's most sacrificial aspirations in a way to make endure.

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ing literature. Wilson, when his popularity was at its apex once said quite simply: "One reason why the American people accept me is that I can put into words what nearly all are thinking."

To a considerable extent Wilson had forgotten "literature" in the noblest utterances of his life, the imperishable war utterances, but, like Whistler, he had "learned how."

I find in John A. Stewart's *Robert Louis Stevenson* a pertinent passage. He is speaking of Sir Walter Scott's blemished literary style but vast epic achievement, and writes: "It is no paradox to say that not until the creative writer forgets words in the glow . . . of creation does he achieve the glories, the harmonies, and witcheries of great style."

The old Samoan chieftain turning away from Stevenson's fresh covered grave and saying simply: "Tofā, Tusitala," ("Sleep, Teller of Tales") made, unconsciously, better literature than Stevenson himself had made in many overladen pages of faultless diction.

Wilson had not the naïve simplicity of the Samoan chief nor the blemishes of Sir Walter Scott, but when he was caught in the deluge of blood that was engulfing the world, he, forgetting words, made a more impeccable literature than when he wrote the *American People*, when, alluding to Francis Bacon's language, he was "in love with words."

Shifting from this matter of "style" one turns to the five thick volumes (multiplied into ten by the publisher in later editions) and thinks what a deal of American history one may learn here: history from the early Spanish explorers and chroniclers down through the administration of President McKinley. Doubtless present-day specialists can name works more essential than this and the writings of John Fiske.

But both these men wrote history as literature and knew what they were writing about. Wilson admired Fiske, a little

ruefully. He was too large-minded to be jealous, but he knew that Fiske was doing, with a somewhat lighter touch than his own, the thing he was striving to do, writing history as literature. Upon the announcement of a new book by Fiske, Wilson said, smilingly but meaningfully: "I wish he would keep out of my bailiwick."

Of the little for which there is space I remark on the proportioning of Wilson's work, the apparent ease with which he subordinates details to the purpose of the whole book. It is easier to condense the story of the battle of San Jacinto than to spread a panorama of the confused struggles of Spain, France, Mexico, England and Holland to win and control the region now known as the United States of America. One of the outstanding merits of the book is the ordered arrangement of major and lesser events. Wilson's mind was an instrument of singular order and precision.

Thus, Wilson knows and sets down the story of San Jacinto succinctly as part of a greater whole, not a localism but an heroic episode in the westernization of the Union. He specifies the attack, the repulse, the slaughter, the surrender to "the redoubtable Sam Houston," the capture of the Mexican prisoners of war including Santa Anna himself, specifies the small number of Americans, the large number of Mexicans killed and wounded, dramatizes the event with Aaron Burr's comment: "I was thirty years too soon," and passes on to the immense importance of free Texas to the Union, and, later, after the Mexican War, to the vast significance of the great new region in the expansion of the West, the struggle over state sovereignty and the prolonged Congressional debates over slavery, leading up to the titanic war between the states.

He sticks to his doctrine that the South was right in legal interpretation of the constitution, the North wrong in that,

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but right in its perception that the expanding West and the rapidly developing industrialism, the increase of immigration, had compelled a fresh interpretation of the constitution.

Though never a soldier in uniform, Wilson possessed a true understanding of military strategy. That was manifested in his remarkable address to the officers of the Atlantic fleet in 1917 when he said that only by encircling the "nest" of German U-boats could submarine warfare be stopped, not by letting the German boats sail from their base and then hunting them over the wide seas—his own words were "hunting hornets all over the farm."

His understanding of the strategies of Union and Confederate armies has already been referred to in our résumé of *Division and Reunion*. This is expanded in the *American People*.

One of his fine traits as an historian is his impartiality. Personally he was a hot partisan, but he knew that the historian must hold the scales as even as the goddess of justice. None could tell by reading his histories whether he was Northern or Southern. He understood both sections even as General Lee and President Lincoln had understood. He sympathized with the heroic South, its almost unparalleled sacrifices, its never surpassed valor, fighting, back to the wall, for a cause that was already lost when it began, notwithstanding the brilliant field victories it won in the earlier period of the war, victories due largely to the leadership of commanding officers whose military acumen and power of enlisting the worshipful following of men in the ranks has scarcely been equalled, certainly not surpassed in the history of warfare. But his convictions were on the side of the North under the civilian leadership of Abraham Lincoln, for he knew that a divided country would inevitably lead to the setting up of a number of petty states, probably preys to foreign conquest.

In conversation he once said what he would never have written in a book: "My feelings about Jefferson Davis are most illogical. I am sure the South should have lost, but I am impatient with Davis who did so much to make it lose."

Another fine trait, this time intuitional and literary, is his power of portraiture. To describe a great man of the past as justly as one man can understand and describe another was one of his aims and one of his accomplishments. Of course he had to write of the economics of history, the westward migration, the epochal acquisition of the Louisiana territory, the foreign imbroglios with Mexico by land, with England by sea and land, the blockades, the dispute over the Northwest boundary, the night debates in Congress, the compromises, the political campaigns, the transforming mechanical inventions, the home life on the stately Southern plantations and in the rude frontier cabins, the fiscal policies, the decisions of the courts, of innumerable other matters, but his portraits of men stand out like embossments on a shield.

He liked strong men, such as Andrew Jackson, whom he liked scarcely less for his eccentricities and dictatorial ways. He liked men of simplicity, in the manner of General Taylor; simplicity mingled with high intellectualism, such as Lincoln, Olympians, such as Daniel Webster, well-nigh perfect men such as General Lee, whom he had seen when he was a little boy, whose autographed photograph stood on the mantel in S Street, when he himself was old and broken. John Drinkwater's play on Lee was performed in Washington when Mr. Wilson was too ill to attend the theatre. Testily he said: "No Englishman can understand Lee, no, nor no Northern man either." Yet he himself, Southern-born, understood Lincoln so well that his address at Hodgenville is not only a portion of imperishable American literature,

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but called forth many letters from people who had known Lincoln personally and who said that in all the multifarious writing about Lincoln this was the only thing that really probed the inmost nature of Lincoln.

Wilson was scarcely ever finer than when portraying a great subtle man in whose doctrines he did not believe. Consider this on John C. Calhoun, with whose theories of the constitution he disagreed, but in whom he discerned a tragic trait of devotion to the death :

"A tall spare old man, the lines of whose striking face and haunting deep-set eyes marked him as the very embodiment of a single stern and watchful purpose, an ascetic knight challenger set down in lonely guard to keep an ancient shrine of doctrine. Eight years before he had told his friends upon what single principle he had acted since 1823, and must ever act so long as he remained upon the field of action. He had opposed Mr. Adams and Mr. Clay, had supported General Jackson and then turned from him, had acted with the Whigs against Mr. Van Buren and with Mr. Tyler against the Whigs, always with his one hope and purpose, 'to restore the old states rights Republican doctrine of '98 ; with the solemn belief that on their restoration the existence of our free popular institutions depended.' He came of the hard-willed, indomitable stuff of the North of Ireland, and showed in all his strenuous course the definite mind, the inflexible purpose, the reserved self-restraint of the Ulsterman. When he went off the stage politics seemed bereft of some force, as of private and personal conviction, and left to the guidance of men who looked for their opportunity, not for their day of justification."

The utter justice of that estimate, the mingled analysis and fact need no comment; not analysis in the tedious manner of the pedagogue, but one magnificent clause which con-

nects Calhoun with that great chivalry of the Old South, "an ascetic knight challenger set down in lonely guard to keep an ancient shrine of doctrine."

The reference to Calhoun's North-of-Ireland origin is symptomatic of Wilson's devotion to the land of his own ancestors, which is the region of Andrew Jackson's ancestry. On his death bed Jackson expressed only one regret, that he had not hanged Calhoun; but Wilson sees deeper than the old frontier autocrat saw, sees that Calhoun's apparent changes were really marks of his steadfastness. It was the country that was changing, not Calhoun. That North-of-Ireland stuff, really Scottish by origin, was heart of oak bound with hoops of steel. Self-willed Andrew Jackson changed only because his environment had changed, and with that change his convictions, to which he held as tenaciously as Calhoun held to his "Republican" (old name of the Jeffersonian Democracy) principles. Calhoun was fighting for a lost cause but he fought as vigorously as Jackson fought for the new and winning cause, the cause of a recently-born Western Democracy. They were great fighters, these North-of-Ireland men. They would much rather enter Gethsemane and climb Calvary than sacrifice a principle. Woodrow Wilson himself was to exemplify this in later years.

Professor John Stuart Blackie said that if people would only remember that Gladstone was Scottish they would cease to wonder that he was "a great scholar and a great statesman."

Wilson's analyzed portrait of Calhoun, though eloquent, could scarcely be challenged for its diction and structure even by William Bayard Hale. It is a nobler monument than could be carved in marble or cast in bronze, and it is only one of several kindred pieces of word-magic in the *History of the American People*.

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One matter in this *History*, not directly related to what I have been saying, but pertinent to the literary cast of Wilson's mind during those happy years in Library Place.

In the last volume he wrote, anent the census of 1890:

"Immigrants poured steadily in but with an alteration of stock . . . Throughout the century men of the sturdy stocks of the north of Europe had made up the strain of foreign blood which was every year added to the vital working force of the country, or else men of the Latin stocks of France and northern Italy; but now there came multitudes of men of the lowest class from the south of Italy and men of the meaner sort out of Hungary and Poland, men out of the ranks where there was neither skill nor energy nor any initiative of quick intelligence . . . men whose standards of life and of work were such as American workmen had never dreamed of. . . . The Chinese were more to be desired, as workmen if not as citizens, than most of the coarse crew that came crowding in every year at the eastern ports."

A man of intelligence with ambition for electoral political office could not have written that. He would have foreseen the thing that came to pass when ten years later he should become a candidate for popular suffrage. He would have foreseen that this passage would be capitalized against him by hostile newspapers and opposition speakers. It was, generally and generously.

The wonder is that Wilson survived the indiscretion. He would not have done so, but for the Progressive clamor in the West and the Northwest, and but for the wide-open split in the Republican Party.

However, when Wilson wrote that paragraph he was not thinking of political candidacy at all. He was man of letters writing history.

STOCKTON AXSON.









